

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places  
Inventory—Nomination Form**

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Continuation sheet N-5170

Item number 7

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N-5170

Property Name: ✓ Riverdale (W. B. Diehl, 1868), Built ca. 1840

Location and Verbal Boundary Description:

Situated approximately 400 feet southeast of the intersection of Bay View Road (route 423) and Silver Run Road (route 424). The nominated area is an elongated rectangle extending 800 feet from the back of the lot to the edge of route 423 and is 300 feet wide running from the entry lane to the north side of the present yard. The nomination includes the privy in the back yard but not the modern group of farm related structures further to the west.

Nominated parcel begins on the west side of Rt. 423, 200 feet south of its intersection with Route 424. The line runs to the west for a distance of 800 feet, until it forms a 90° angle and runs to the south for 300 feet. At this point the line forms a 90° turn to the east for 800 feet. The boundary is closed by joining the two points on the west side of Rt. 423.

UTM 18.47960.70660

Tax parcel 13-019.00-010

Acreage = 9.5 acres

Owner: Roger D. Brenegan

R.D. 2, P. O. Box 452

Middletown, Delaware

Description

The rectangular core of the house is four-bays wide and a single room deep. There is a 22 foot two-story L-shaped extension projecting from the northern section of the back wall of this core, and the central portion of the south wall of this extension supports a small lean-to enclosure. The house core has a gable roof with single flush brick chimneys at each gable end. The modern extension also has a gable roof, but it is without chimney projections. The center of the core facade has a small enclosed porch.

The facade is completely symmetrical with four second story windows aligned over two central balanced doors and two end windows. All the windows are double-sash with six-over-six panes of old glass. Each window on the facade has two louvered shutters;

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however, the original first floor window once had solid paneled shutters. The recessed molded doors are surmounted by four-pane transom lights. The back wall of the house core has three second floor and three first floor windows of the identical type and placement as those on the facade, without shutters. Each long wall of the extension wing contains two second floor and three first floor windows of the same type, while the lean-to holds three smaller windows of the same pane configuration.

The ground floor plan of the house core consists of two equally proportioned sixteen foot square parlors separated by a single wall with a central passage. Each of the front doors offers access to one of the parlors. The north wall of the northern parlor contains a built-in cupboard and a closet flanking the now dismantled fireplace. Adjacent to the closet toward the back wall is the door to a boxed winden staircase to the second floor and attic. Adjacent to the protruding bottom steps is the entrance through the back wall into the modern kitchen wing. The south parlor contains only a modern brick fireplace, in place of the dismantled original. Both parlors retain their original beaded chairrail and baseboard moundings. Flanking the northern hearth area is a single corner beaded mounding. The lean-to on the south wall encloses the exterior steps to the basement.

The second floor of the core contains three bedrooms off a back hallway. The northernmost fireplace is intact, while the southern fireplace appears to have been walled in. All these rooms and hall retain their original beaded baseboard molding. The door of each room has an iron box-lock. The second floor of the extension contains a modern bath and two additional rooms. The attic is unfinished and divided into two sections by a rough battened door fastened with wrought nails. The house core has a full brick walled basement of white-washed common bond. The floor and wall framing is exposed and a number of notched and locking lap joints are visible. The basement floor is constructed out of yellowish brick in an unusual "herringbone" bond.

At this time, the house is covered with aluminum siding and the roof is covered with asphalt shingles. These cover the original horizontal clapboard exterior and a roof of cedar shingles, and have been added in the last decade. The enclosed aluminum porch was also added at this time onto the existing cement foundation of an earlier porch. A photograph from the early twentieth century shows an open porch of the same size supported by two wooden posts. Circa 1930; the original two-story kitchen wing with two upstairs bedrooms was dismantled and the extension and leanto which now exist were constructed overlapping the original. Also removed at this time was a lattice work, enclosed, brick floored leanto porch which enclosed the remainder of the back wall. The only clearly identifiable interior alterations include the very recent removal of both first floor parlor fireplaces, and an earlier paneling over of the upstairs southern bedroom fireplace.

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To the east of the back of the house is the cement foundation of an old privy. This was also the reported location of the earlier, more primitive, privy pit. Both the cement foundation of the privy and the cement foundation of the front porch most probably relate to the 1930's rebuilding period. Behind the privy stretched an extensive array of agricultural outbuildings. In the early twentieth century this complex included: a horse barn, a cow barn with lot, a pig shed, a poultry shed, a corn crib, a tool shed and a well with a windmill. All of these disappeared or were destroyed when the modern barn was constructed in this decade. The driveway is in its old location, which divided the house lot from the extensive orchards to the south. A picket fence ran along the house lot from the backyard out to the main road, forming a long rectangular enclosure of the house and yard. A separate split-rail fence enclosed the farm fields and complex. Nothing but uneven ground remains to indicate the location of the other outbuildings. A slight linear mounding of earth marks the old footpath from the front doors to the central gate in the fence by the road.

Historical Background and Significance:

The Riverside farm came to its active size of 144 acres when it passed to one of the heirs of a local land magnate in the first quarter of the century. Thomas Fitzgerald had amassed a large estate of land in New Castle County as a result of the land sales, foreclosures and bankruptcies brought about by the severe agricultural depression at the end of the eighteenth century. Poor soil conservation and over-farming had reduced the fertility of the land dramatically, precipitating a wide-spread depopulation of the farming heartland of New Castle County.

In the second quarter of the nineteenth century the land passed into the hands of the first in four generations of Diehls, a local farming family. This period saw a number of changes not only in the ways of farming, but also in the farmer's attitude toward the land. Smaller farm owners began to work their own land as the large tenant farming operations came into being. This brought an influx of what might be called an agrarian middle-class out into the country. This period was also marked by the rise of numerous agricultural innovations in methods, machinery and crops which allowed these farmers to consolidate the value of their land and continue to prosper. The Diehl family was just such a group; and the Diehl House, which was built in the 1840's, represents the small conservative dwelling of these comfortable farmers.

Throughout the third quarter of the nineteenth century, the agricultural picture continued to improve. The regional trend to diversification was evident on the Diehl farm as the agricultural census documents showed the shift from a focus on grains in 1850 to include livestock and vegetables by 1870. These successful agricultural experiments resulted in a steady increase in the farm's cash value from \$5,000 to \$15,000 over the same period. This prosperity probably resulted in the renovation or addition to the house or farm buildings. It may be possible that the construction of the slightly elaborate basement brick floor or the lattice porch may date from this time.

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In the last quarter of the century the farm continued the trend to diversity with the addition of poultry and fruit. Most notable, was the establishment of one of the extensive peach orchards which became so prevalent in the region in the third quarter of the nineteenth century. Unfortunately, a glutted peach market and severe blight in the 1870's reduced the profitability of most area orchards. The abrupt drop in the property value of the farm from \$15,000 to \$7,000 by 1880 dramatically illustrates the ruinous effect of this collapse. This probably accounts for the fact that W. B. Diehl, the farmer during this period, died in debt; thus his son had to buy, rather than inherit, the land. This depression eventually passed, and the farm continued to provide a profitable living and a comfortable residence for Diehl farmers until the land was partitioned in the middle twentieth century.

In summary, the stages in the development of the Diehl property through the nineteenth century seem to provide a series of tangible socio-economic indicators of regional agricultural trends. Architectural analysis, census and tax data, deed, will and probate records, historic maps and atlases, old photographs and oral history all mesh into a remarkably complete record of the evolution of the Diehl farmstead. The house and farm were established and steadily improved through the second and third quarter of the century as an agricultural revolution engulfed the family owned farm system. Finally, in the last quarter of the century, the Diehl farm, with the rest of the region, suffered the collapse of the peach industry. Due to the correlation between significant farm events and the broader regional patterns, the Diehl property is a valuable component in this thematic nomination addressing regional agricultural and architectural development in the nineteenth century.

Nomination by Henry Ward